There is a very rich body of literature that deals with the changing nature of war in recent decades, especially since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block and the constitution of the so-called New World Order. While part of this literature examines the technologically-inspired changes that resulted from the Information Revolution (usually referred to as the “Revolution in Military Affairs,” or RMA), a much greater part of the literature explores the supposedly new phenomenon of “asymmetric wars,” that is, wars between states and non-state actors. In some cases, such a war is between the state and an armed non-state actor operating from areas outside state-controlled territory, for example Israel’s war against Hizballah, which operates in Lebanon. In other cases it is a civil war, for example the current civil war in Syria, in which government forces are fighting rebel forces. Sometimes the combat includes both elements, e.g. the war in Afghanistan, in which NATO forces and the Afghan government’s forces are fighting the Taliban inside Afghanistan and in the neighboring state, Pakistan. It follows that this category of war encompasses a wide variety of armed conflicts and is becoming the more common form of war in our era.

War is a vast political, social and cultural phenomenon; consequently, it can be explored through the lenses of different disciplines. In his new book, Dr. Uri Ben Eliezer, a sociologist whose areas of specialization include the sociology of war, the relationship among the military, society and politics in Israel, and civil society and militarism, attempts to give a historical-sociological explanation for the nature of Israel’s new wars, covering the period that began in the early 1990s but focusing on the first decade of the twenty-first century. He tries to understand the Second Intifada and the wars that followed it using an “institutional constructivist” paradigm. According to this approach, cultural conflicts and social constructs within the society determine the nature of the armed conflicts in which a given society is involved. Domestic pressures, identity politics and domestic struggles over the interpretation of reality have more explanatory power than the states’ rational calculation of interests, costs, and benefits, which determine the nature of wars according to the realist paradigm.

Ben Eliezer bases his research on a methodology that combines the construction of a historical narrative of the period studied with an analysis of texts that are meant to reflect the conceptions and interpretations of the important actors. The researcher engages with these texts in order to track the way these conceptions became a central institutional construct of the society and to determine whether the construct is stable or is changing through domestic struggles. The main thesis presented in the book is that the history and the nature of the wars between Israel...
and the Palestinians in the new millennium were determined by domestic Israeli reasons, internal conflicts and tensions that were externalized into wars. According to Ben Eliezer, the main internal conflict in Israel is between a civil society that is just emerging and is still quite weak, and a strong militaristic and religious society. The militaristic and religious society has the upper hand but sometimes makes concessions to civil society. Therefore, the policy that is selected reflects a compromise between the two perspectives. An example to that effect is the way the security fence in the West Bank was built and operated. This reflected a concept of integration with a large part of the West Bank (to satisfy the militaristic-religious society) and separation from the Palestinians (to satisfy civil society).

Ben Eliezer attempts to preempt possible criticism of his work by proposing that he has no pretensions of giving a full explanation to the phenomena he describes, and therefore focuses only on understanding Israeli society and Israeli policies. This disclaimer is not very convincing, however, because the issue is not whether the book offers a full explanation or only a partial one. Complex and versatile social phenomena such as war cannot be fully explained by any one comprehensive thesis and therefore one can expect every explanation based on one paradigm to be partial. The real issue is whether this particular partial explanation is defective due to serious methodological problems. Conflicts in general, and armed conflicts in particular, are a dynamic game between two actors. Ben Eliezer rightly points out that each of the actors is not composed of a single unit but rather represents a state and a society that are composed of individuals, groups and organizations. The policy of each actor is certainly shaped to a great extent by domestic politics. As evidence, one need only quote Henry Kissinger, who after attempting to mediate between Israel and Syria, famously stated that “Israel does not have a foreign policy, only a domestic policy.” But to reach a deeper level of understanding one has to ask additional questions: what forms domestic politics? Are states and societies sealed entities that do not react to external stimuli? Dynamics between Israel and the Palestinians are inescapable. These dynamics are having substantial effects on the positions of the people and groups that compose each society. Is it possible to separate, for example, the fact that the majority of Israeli society believes that there is no Palestinian partner with which to negotiate from the developments within Palestinian society?

Another serious weakness of this research is its complete dependence on analysis of written texts. In this case, the vast majority of the texts are quotations from written and electronic media. That raises three methodological problems. The first is the credibility of these texts. Do they really reflect the thoughts and the emotions of the persons that are quoted or referred to? In many cases the media distorts or misinterprets what people are saying. That can be solved to some extent by basing the analysis on additional sources such as interviews of key persons, but the author limited himself to these media pieces and did not